GUIDE TO THE AW42 SANTAL FILE

[The Santals are one of the largest tribal groups in India; they had a population of about two and one-half million according to the census of 1931, and their estimated population around 1960 was placed at over three million (cf. 5: Culshaw, p. 1; 1: Orans, p. xi). They occupy primarily the Chotanagpur Plateau, with their settlements distributed over an area of 350 miles from the Ganges to the Baitarani, between 86-88 degrees east longitude and 22-26 degrees north latitude. Politically, this region extends through the states of Bihar, West Bengal, and northern Orissa. Within each of these states the Santal population is concentrated as follows: Bihar - districts of Santal Parganas, Manbhum, Singhbhum, Bhagalpur, Hazaribagh, and Monghyr; West Bengal - districts of Bankura, Birbhum, and Midnapore; Orissa - districts of Mayurbhanj and Balasore. The Santal Parganas district is considered to be the heart of the Santal area. Beyond this region, the Santals have spread widely in India as agricultural and industrial laborers; for instance, over 100,000 Santals were recorded in Assam in 1931 (cf. 3: Mukherjea, pp. 46, 51, 54-62; 5: Culshaw, pp. iv, 1, 13).

The Santals are a non-Hindu people - in fact, they make a clear distinction based on race between themselves and Hindus, and are classified as a "Pre-Dravidian" tribe. Their language, Santali, belongs to the Munda (or Mundari) branch of the Austro-Asiatic language family. There are dialectical variations in Santali, but 1: Orans (p. 6) claims there is almost complete mutual intelligibility throughout the population. Moreover, this mutual intelligibility is said to be a basis of their social cohesion, which has been maintained despite the fact that the Santals as a whole have never been politically unified so far as historical records indicate (cf. 1: Orans, pp. xi, 6; 4: Biswas, p. 2; 5: Culshaw, pp. vii, 2, 15).

Mukherjea considers the main dialectical distinction to be between what he calls Northrtn Santali, which is spoken by the great majority of Santals, and Southern Santali. The latter is spoken in the southern part of Bihar and in Orissa, while Northern Santali is spoken in most of Bihar and in West Bengal. Orans raises this distinction to a general dialectical-cultural differentiation between the Northern and Southern Santals (cf. 3: Mukherjea, p. 30; 1: Orans, p. 13). It is not clear to what extent this is a really significant differentiation.

Santal social organization is characterized by a lack of caste cleavages, which are so prominent in Hindu society, a patrilineal kinship system, and a relatively low level of political integration. The entire society seems to be divided into nine exogamous but non-corporate patrilineal sibs. (By tradition there should be 12 sibs, but Orans says that actually there appear to be obly 9). These sibs are sub-divided into sub-sibs, which in turn are sub-divided into local patrilineal lineages, which are the largest corporate kin groups. The basic family unit is the extended partilocal family. Each village is usually composed of a number of lineages. The village is evidently the key political unit, but the largest formally organized territorial unit is the Pargana, a loose confederation of approximately a dozen villages bound together to settle certain judicial questions, and headed by an official called a Parganath. 5: Culshaw also discusses the Pargana, and this seems to be the same unit which Biswas calls a bunglow, describing it as an administrative grouping of villages headed by a parganait. No higher level of political organization is mentioned (cf. 1: Orans, pp. x, xi, 10, 11; 3: Mukherjea, pp. 135, 138; 4: Biswas, p. 158).

Five full-length monographs, all in English, constitute the sources processed for this file thus far. Four of these are general ethnographies, with 1: Orans being a partial exception. The earliest source is 3: Skrefsrud. Skrefsrud was a missionary who, in 1870-71, wrote down in Santali an account of nineteenth century Santal culture dictated by an elderly man who seems to have had an outstanding knowledge of native traditions and customs. This Santali text was published, but the source processed here is a subsequent English translation of this publication with notes and additions by P.O. Bodding. Good information is provided on a broad range of Santal life, including a description of the Santal rebellion against the dominant Hindus.

3: Mukherjea, 4: Biswas, and 5: Culshaw overlap in terms of field research dates, which range from 1931 to 1945. Mukherjea, a lawyer and educator, presents a general synthesis of Santal culture based on the literature and his own field work during the period ca. 1933-39. His main field locales were the district of Mayurbhanj in Orissa and the district of Santal Parganas in Bihar. Especially notable is the attention paid throughout this source to regional differences in the culture.

Culshaw, a missionary, obtained his data principally from the village of Sarenga located in the Bankura district of West Bengal where he resided from 1932 to 1943. A previous five years were spent at Pakur in the Santal Parganas district. His book is a thorough ethnographic description of the Santals, including an account of their history and relations with the surrounding Hindu population, and a discussion of the cultural impact of Christian (Protestant) missions since their establishment in the middle of the nineteenth century.

4: Biswas, by a professional anthropologist, also presents a systematic coverage of ethnography and culture history, but focused on the Santals of Santal Parganas district where Biswas did field work in 1931-34 and 1944-45.

Finally, 1: Orans is by an American social anthropologist who did field work in 1957-58 among the Southern Santals, primarily in the Singhbhum district of Bihar. Specifically, he studied Santal industrial workers in the city of Jamshedpur and living in a nearby settlement which he calls Daredih; he also spent time in one rural village in Mayurbhanj district about 50 miles from the city. This is a study of cultural change focusing upon an analysis of the recent sociocultural resurgence among the Santals, which is being led by the educated and industrialized segment of the population. Especially noteworthy are Orans' theory of the "rank concession syndrome," and its application in his interpretation of the Santal data.]

Processed in 1969-1971

File Guide prepared in 1971
by Robert O. Lagacé